

Directions

Read “Primary Lessons,” an excerpt from Judith Ortiz Cofer’s memoir *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. Then do Numbers 1 through 3.

Primary Lessons



by Judith Ortiz Cofer

¹ My mother walked me to my first day at school at La Escuela Segundo Ruiz Belvis, named after the Puerto Rican patriot born in our town. I remember yellow cement with green trim. All the classrooms had been painted these colors to identify them as government property. This was true all over the Island. Everything was color-coded, including the children, who wore uniforms from first through twelfth grade. We were a midget army in white and brown, led by the hand to our battleground. From practically every house in our barrio¹ emerged a crisply ironed uniform inhabited by the savage creatures we had become over a summer of running wild in the sun.

At my grandmother’s house where we were staying until my father returned to Brooklyn Yard in New York and sent for us, it had been complete chaos, with several children to get ready for school. My mother had pulled my hair harder than usual while braiding it, and I had dissolved into a pool of total self-pity. I wanted to stay home with her and Mamá, to continue listening to stories in the

late afternoon, to drink *café con leche*² with them, and to play rough games with my many cousins. I wanted to continue living the dream of summer afternoons in Puerto Rico, and if I could not have it, then I wanted to go back to Paterson, New Jersey, back to where I imagined our apartment waited, peaceful and cool, for the three of us to return to our former lives. Our gypsy lifestyle had convinced me, at age six, that one part of life stops and waits for you while you live another for a while—and if you don’t like the present, you can always return to the past. Buttoning me into my stiff blouse while I tried to squirm away from her, my mother attempted to explain to me that I was a big girl now and should try to understand that, like all the other children my age, I had to go to school.

“What about him?” I yelled, pointing at my ³ brother who was lounging on the tile floor of our bedroom in his pajamas, playing quietly with a toy car.

“He’s too young to go to school, you know that. Now stay still.” My mother pinned me

¹barrio: neighborhood

²*café con leche*: coffee with milk

between her thighs to button my skirt, as she had learned to do from Mamá, from whose grip it was impossible to escape.

5 “It’s not fair, it’s not fair. I can’t go to school here. I don’t speak Spanish.” It was my final argument, and it failed miserably because I was shouting my defiance in the language I claimed not to speak. Only I knew what I meant by saying in Spanish that I did not speak Spanish. I had spent my early childhood in the U.S. where I lived in a bubble created by my Puerto Rican parents in a home where two cultures and languages became one. I learned to listen to the English from the television with one ear while I heard my mother and father speaking in Spanish with the other. I thought I was an ordinary American kid—like the children on the shows I watched—and that everyone’s parents spoke a secret second language at home. When we came to Puerto Rico right before I started first grade, I switched easily to Spanish. It was the language of fun, of summertime games. But school—that was a different matter.

I made one last desperate effort to make my mother see reason: “Father will be very angry. You know that he wants us to speak good English.” My mother, of course, ignored me as she dressed my little brother in his playclothes. I could not believe her indifference to my father’s wishes. She was usually so careful about our safety and the many other areas that he was forever reminding her about in his letters. But I was right, and she knew

it. Our father spoke to us in English as much as possible, and he corrected my pronunciation constantly—not “jes” but “y-es.” Y-es, sir. How could she send me to school to learn Spanish when we would be returning to Paterson in just a few months?

But, of course, what I feared was not language, 7 but loss of freedom. At school there would be no playing, no stories, only lessons. It would not matter if I did not understand a word, and I would not be allowed to make up my own definitions. I would have to learn silence. I would have to keep my wild imagination in check. Feeling locked into my stiffly starched uniform, I only sensed all this. I guess most children can intuit³ their loss of childhood’s freedom on that first day of school. It is separation anxiety too, but mother is just the guardian of the “playground” of our early childhood.

The sight of my cousins in similar straits comforted me. We were marched down the hill of our barrio where Mamá’s robin-egg-blue house stood at the top. I must have glanced back at it with yearning. Mamá’s house—a place built for children—where anything that could be broken had already been broken by my grandmother’s early batch of offspring (they ranged in age from my mother’s oldest sisters to my uncle who was six months older than me). Her house had long since been made child-proof. It had been a perfect summer place. And now it was September—the cruelest month for a child.

³**intuit:** to know intuitively or instinctively

1 Which of these conclusions about the narrator's mother is best supported by information in the excerpt?

- F** She wants to leave Puerto Rico.
- G** She wants her daughter to become educated.
- H** She does not care about her husband's wishes.
- J** She does not want her daughter to learn English.

2 Which of these themes is best developed in the excerpt?

- A** learning from parents
- B** making new friends
- C** feeling far from home
- D** losing one's freedom

3 Write an explanation that tells what the narrator means when she says September is "the cruelest month for a child." Include details and examples from the excerpt that clearly support your explanation. Write your explanation on the lines in your Answer Book.

Acknowledgments: "Primary Lessons" by Judith Ortiz Cofer is reprinted with permission from the publisher of *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (Houston: Arte Publico Press—University of Houston, 1990).

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